

LEADING THROUGH EMPOWERING - MAKING GOOD, TIMELY DECISIONS

By Joseph T. Deneault, P.E., HNTB Corporation

Introduction

Construction managers can become better leaders and help facilitate job progress by empowering their staff, at all levels, to make and accept responsibility for better decisions. This presentation will show how staff development and empowerment help projects run more smoothly.

Making Decisions

This hypothetical situation occurs all too often at every level of responsibility on CM projects. It can be the Resident Engineer, a Senior Inspector or even an Inspector Aide who fears the consequences of making a “bad” decision, and lets time snowball the unmade decision into a real problem. **Decisions** are the grease that keeps CM projects moving—without them everything grinds to a halt.

Unfortunately, construction is not governed by a set of written procedures that clearly outlines every situation and contingency. Past training, knowledge, experience, confidence and empowerment form the basis from which CM staffs extract the data needed to make a decision. The key is understanding the facts of the problem to be solved, and applying the right information to come to the decision in a timely manner. Regardless of how well the staff knows the problem, how much information they have to help form the decision or anything else, they will not perform well without a **decision-making attitude**.

The cumulative costs of a non-decision maker are much greater than the occasional wrong decision. There must be prudent risk taking. All need to recognize that depending on their particular role on a project, we all have boundaries to our authority and responsibility in decision-making, but all of us have decisions to make as part of our jobs.

The following statements, which this presentation will discuss in detail, are classic decision-making and attitude problems that can be corrected through empowerment:

- It's not my job
- They won't let me
- I am not going to take that risk/what if I'm wrong
- They don't need to know right now
- I need more information
- I asked but haven't heard anything

But first, I'd like to address a reality in decision-making phobia, that unintentionally stems from the client: owner fear of trust. This presentation is geared for Owners, CEIs and contractors alike. A lot of contractor delays, cost overruns and, ultimately, claims stem from the owner or CEI not making timely decisions. Many times in my position as State Highway Engineer I had to settle claims where a delay had incurred and I thought to myself, “If they had only made a decision—any decision—the cost would have been cheaper.”

Overcoming Owner Fears

The owner needs to trust his agent, the CEI to make decisions on his behalf. We can put owners in two categories: those that have been outsourcing CEI to consultants for a while and feel comfortable with the process and delegation; and those that are newer to outsourcing. In the latter case, the owner is not familiar with the benefits and drawbacks of handing a task as important as CEI over to a company. So the CEI needs to gain and earn the owner's trust and be a good resource.

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It's typical in contract documents for the project team—the Owner, contractor and CEI firm—to develop a decision process. It is important for the owner to assign a person with the authority, experience and willingness to delegate or make decisions. The owner needs to assess their staff and abilities to make sure they have the right type of project manager. If not, they may need to hire. In organizations that don't have a history of outsourcing CEI, owners need some education from an experienced consultant. Several layers of the owner organization need to trust, work and interact with the CEI.

One way the Owner can help with CEI decision making is to formally or informally get their retirees to work on the CEI project. However, as CEI becomes more popular, there are fewer retired DOT staff to fill that role.

Partnering

One solution to help owners overcome their fears of trusting a CEI, and which also is used successfully in empowering employees to make decisions, is partnering. Partnering is an exercise that happens at the beginning of the project, and becomes part of the project's philosophy. It builds trusting relationships, is characterized by open and frequent communication, commitment to excellence in all aspects of the project and cooperation to achieve rapid project completion. It gives the project team a win-win orientation toward problem resolution and fosters synergistic teamwork.

In recent initial partnering efforts, successful construction means the following has occurred:

- Early problem recognition
- Prompt decisions and problem resolution
- Problem solving at the lowest level

Factors that contribute to success were identified by participants as:

- Decisions at the project level
- Authority well defined
- Decisions from upper management came in a timely fashion

Goals that all parties want to achieve can include:

- Zero claims
- Make a profit
- No rework
- Quality products and quality job
- Safety on the job
- Completion in a timely manner
- Completion within or under budget
- Timely procession of change orders/time extensions

In this presentation, Joe will “deconstruct” the six most common decision-making and attitude problems discussed above that can be corrected through empowerment, and discuss possible solutions for each.

The Solution

Once the Owner has made the decision to empower the CEI to make good, timely decisions, the supervisors within the CEI can use the following methodology to help empower their employees:

- **Confidence** – The supervisor must have the confidence that the employee has the right skills, knowledge and resources to do the job. That must be communicated.
- **Clear Expectations**—Set clear expectations, including task and project goals. Delegate authority.

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- ***Communication***—Ongoing communication is vital so the employee and supervisor are always in sync. Communicate task and overall project goals and processes. Share awareness of problems or changes. Share company and industry news.
- ***Commitment and Support***—The supervisor must be committed to the employee's success and let other parties know it. The employee must have the right tools and information to make decisions or perform research.
- ***Measuring***—Establish metrics in advance, so it is clear what the project standards are. The bottom line is a successful project and a satisfied Owner.
- ***Accountability***—Hold the employee accountable.